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ABSTRACT

Written by a board member of OCLC, this paper discusses critical issues relating to OCLC for the remaining decade of the twentieth century. A brief history of OCLC traces its development and recounts its goals and missions to establish a computerized network to promote the evolution of library use, of libraries themselves, and of librarianship. The first section addresses the criticism that OCLC is too much a business and indifferent to the concerns of libraries and librarians, and explores specific problematic areas in OCLC. The second section describes new challenges to national, regional, and state networks that serve the library community, including escalating costs for telecommunications, equipment, online searching, and new systems. The third section questions how--as it enters the field of electronic publishing, and as scholarship moves more toward access rather than to ownership--OCLC can best serve the end user. The final section discusses the expansion of OCLC's role as an international database, explains similarities and differences among international applications, and discusses economic problems. (SD)

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OCLC, LIBRARIES, AND SCHOLARSHIP: WHAT LIES AHEAD?

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After four years as a Board member of OCLC, with the crises, turmoil, and stress which always arise in a rapidly changing organization, I can only approach such a global topic with some misgivings. The issues are difficult, sometimes intractable, and often confusing. Perhaps no less so than they were at OCLC's founding, some twenty-two years ago. And in sharing some observations and prognostications with you, I want to make it clear that these remarks are mine alone; they do not necessarily reflect those of my fellow Board members.

As a historian, I always like to begin with the past, for I believe that it is impossible to understand where we are now, and where we may be going, without some background. In that sense, we have to begin with OCLC's charter. That charter, though broadly framed, was quite specific in OCLC's mission and goals: to establish "a computerized library network ... to promote the evolution of library use, of libraries themselves, and of librarianship... ." Inherent in that network are the objectives of reducing the rate-of-rise of per unit costs in libraries, and furthering ease of access to information worldwide, as founder Fred Kilgour so often ennunciated.

Thus libraries were, are now, and presumably shall be the main focus of OCLC's efforts. Whatever we may believe about the "end user," few of us on the Board deny that our current members, whether described as "general members," "network members," "customers," etc., are tied directly to the library community. That community is diverse, changing rapidly, increasingly international in scope, and uncertain about the effect of future technological developments on the institutional library and its users.

Librarians are also often out of touch with trends in scholarship and learning, and more tied to traditional humanistic concerns than those of the social scientists, theoretical scientists, applied scientists, and professional disciplines, as Charles Osburn reminded us a decade ago. An excellent example of our problems as librarians can be found in Timothy C. Weiskell's article, "The ELectronic Library: Changing Character of Research," in the November-December 1988 issue of Change magazine. Weiskel, sympathetic to the research library problem, warns that librarians may be losing one of their strongest traditional allies -- the research scholar.

To this massive enterprise we now call OCLC, libraries and librarians have committed enormous sums of money (for them) to

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build the world's pre-eminent international bibliographic database in the unlikely location of Dublin, Ohio. The maintenance of OCLC's pre-eminence as an international bibliographic database is one of the Board's priorities as its "Shared Common Vision" statement of a year ago indicated.

During the tenure of Rowland Brown, our most recent OCLC President, the growth of OCLC was truly remarkable: from 2268 participating libraries in 1980 to 9400 in 1988. Service revenues almost tripled and total assets almost doubled to approximately $100 million. As one who both observed and participated in the fits and starts of library automation during the sixties, I can only be amazed at how far we have come in two decades.

So much for the background. Impressive as our past is, OCLC and libraries face the nineties with some trepidation. Technology, so merciless both in its expansion and its cost, threatens to overwhelm us. So does information overload, an increasing concern of scholars. Stresses and strains among and between libraries, networks, and the parent organization are apparent, and not just from the emotionally loaded "copyright of the database" issue, but also in governance, relationships, and user behavior.

The phrase "Beyond Bibliography," made popular by Fred Kilgour in his Third British Library Annual Research Lecture, in 1984, is one in which many of us have strong hope, even though we may not understand what it means. That hope may be somewhat mitigated by Jean-Claude Gardin's Fifth British Library Annual Research Lecture in 1986. Gardin's lecture, "Expert Systems and Scholarly Publications," expressed his firm belief in expert systems and a new approach to indexing and abstracting data. Yet he noted in his conclusion, "I seem to have landed in a contradiction: on the one hand I speak highly of expert systems; on the other, I advocate an understanding of the intelligence embodied in our texts which I say no expert system is about to give us." (p. 10)

As librarians, we live in hope that somehow, some way, a "user friendly," full-text, analytical/bibliographical approach to information in monographs will indeed lead us "beyond bibliography." But we have to live with the immediate and practical consequences of spiraling journal costs, expanding world-wide production of books and databases, online services which often promise more than they can deliver, and hardware and software which have to be replaced every three to five years.

What does all this mean for OCLC and its users in the remaining decade of the twentieth century? What are our crucial issues? Why, and why now? These are the questions David Bishop said I should try to address, in context, before you discuss tomorrow the four scenarios: (1) International OCLC, (2) End User OCLC, (3) Disappearing OCLC, and (4) Libraries OCLC. Let me take these in reverse order.

I take as my text the OCLC Charter:

(1) That OCLC will continue to be heavily involved with libraries and librarians;

(2) That OCLC will continue to promote the evolution of library use, of libraries themselves, and of librarianship;

(3) That in this process OCLC will continue to expand its database, improve access to information world-wide, move aggressively into electronic publishing, and acquire additional complementary enterprises such as the Forest Press, which fit into its overall scope; and

(4) That, under its new president, Wayne Smith, OCLC's Board will reassess some of its current operations, try to achieve a better focus, and, in the terms of the old IBM phrase, define better "what business we are in." Or, in terms that John Gardner, University of Illinois professor, used at the Users Council in September 1985, that OCLC will not only continue to do things right, but its President and Board will continue to ask "Are we doing the right things?"

Now let me share with you some specifics. Remember, however, these are my own observations and reflect neither those of the President nor the Board.

LIBRARIES OCLC AND GOVERNANCE

OCLC has frankly had a bum rap from a good many critics that it is too much a business and indifferent to the concerns of libraries and librarians. With a Board that constitutionally has six Users Council-elected librarian/members and three Board-elected librarian/members, out of a total of 15 voting Board members, this is a criticism which seems to me unwarranted.

Sometimes I have thought that, if we are indeed a business (and personally I don't have a problem with that), there are few business organizations that have so often antagonized their customers as much as we have. We let the copyright issue and network contracts get way out of hand in an era when the usefulness of a copyright mechanism has to be rethought and licesnsing seems a more reasonable approach. With Harlan Cleveland, I wonder whether or not copyright, except for very limited times, is viable in an information society.

Rowland Brown said, in his response to the Board's farewell luncheon, that his competitors often said to him that OCLC was not a corporation; it's a religion. Competitors found it difficult

to compete with such customer loyalty. I would note for the record that customer loyalty is one of OCLC's greatest assets. If OCLC is the librarian's true religion, then we need to think seriously about those who may wander off or lapse from the one true faith.

But relating to its members/customers and determining their needs is not a simple matter. We have erected a structure of so many advisory committees and councils that the staff seem to spend an inordinate amount of time on meetings. Such activities may be endemic to librarians, but I raise the question whether our members/customers are better served in this manner than they might be with a less expensive and more effective means of communicating librarian/customer concerns to the staff and/or Board.

Although I have an antipathy toward reorganization schemes (they often accomplish less than their original objectives and often at a very high price), OCLC is probablay overdue for reconsideration of its governance structure. The international ventures (about which more later) have raised the question of what kind of members they are, if indeed they are members in the conventional sense at all. Representative democracy may not be the best pattern for governing a not-for-profit organization. Several persons have suggested that it's time for another Arthur D. Little type study. So at the risk of raising a red flag, I ask, "Does a membership elected Board really make any sense any more?" I'm not sure it does. If that is heresy, then in your discussions tomorrow, you should make the most of it.

Nonetheless, I firmly believe that OCLC must continue to consider libraries and librarians its main focus. The needs, wants, changing structures, and especially user behavior in libraries, must be our major concern. Such recognition seems to me to call not only for providing users with better access to information but also for addressing their information overload problem.

At our annual UNC Librarians Association conference last Monday in Chapel Hill, after a brilliant and articulate presentation by Kathleen Molz, three faculty members from the humanities, social sciences, and medicine identified the expectations they have of the research library enterprise today. Essentially what they want is relevant, timely, and convenient information, in whatever form, to carry out their research activities. This suggests to me that OCLC must help libraries and librarians by developing mediation services, both textual and bibliographical, which are needed for scholarly purposes. How we can do that and build on our bibliographic database is surely one of the Board's major concerns and one to which I will return shortly.

The recent OCLC/Carnegie Mellon University "Mercury Project," which envisions building a prototype of an electronic library, which brings research information to the scholar's workstation, may also provide some answers to our problems here.

LIBRARY NETWORKS: DISAPPEARING OCLC?

By any objective standard, national, regional and state networks have served the library community well. Their constituency, however, is changing. As state networks become stronger, they are a challenge to the regional networks. As overhead costs increase, members get restive and look for other alternatives. Even OCLC is not immune to challenges that it may not provide the "maximum access at least cost," to paraphrase Melvil Dewey. The tiered pricing structure was an attempt, in part, to begin addressing the issue of "least cost." We have to recognize that OCLC's global concerns are not always the concerns of the local networks and their members. How does one maintain a reasonable relationship among the diverse entities that comprise OCLC and its contracting parties?

As I thought about this issue of relationships and costs, I was well aware that we have seen many library/computer cooperatives and vendors rise and fall. Those who thought there were great sums of money to be made in bibliographic records have certainly been disappointed. It surely must come as a surprise to some vendors that libraries don't have unlimited sums of money to spend. In the past, OCLC has been in a good position because of customer loyalty. Still, competition has be an increasing concern. Any organization like ours has to be sensitive to costs, and we need to remember that reducing the rise-of-costs is one of our objectives.

As I wrote these remarks, I was reminded of a couple of quotes from a department store mogul related in Peter Drucker's Adventures of a Bystander. Uncle Henry Bernheim was accustomed to emphasizing two points to Drucker: "If it ain't on the shelf you can't sell it," and "There is no customer loyalty that two cents off can't overcome." All the rest, he said, is hard work. You can obviously draw your own conclusions from these quotes as they relate to OCLC.

Neither OCLC nor its networks has a guaranteed existence. If OCLC cannot meet the competition from other agencies, whether for-profit, governmental, or other networks, then one of the scenarios suggested by David BIshop might very well become true. Escalating telecommunications costs, equipment costs, online searching costs, new systems, all of these are matters which concern librarians, as they do the Board, on a regular basis. Our products have to be on the shelf, on time, and as nearly as possible "two cents off." To do otherwise would be to lose that customer loyalty which has been our hallmark.

END USER OCLC: ENDLESS OCLC?

As OCLC enters the field of electronic publishing and as scholarship moves more toward access rather than ownership, we will continue to examine how we jointly can best serve the "end user," to use a phrase which I despise. That user, or at

least a number of them, connected to local networks, or larger national networks, can already bypass libraries and their networks and go directly to the source, whether that source is a commercial publisher offering textual online services, or other information providers who offer bits and pieces of information. However, it is hard for me to visualize a situation in which access for large numbers of persons will not be through some library connection.

Let me admit that my crystal ball is not very clear on this point. As a member of a recent visiting committee for a university press, I queried my publishing colleagues about how scholarly presses expected to survive on the scholarly monograph of 300+ pages which may sell 500 copies for $34.95. After all, one can jack up the price only so high, even if our journal publishing friends think they can continue to exploit us.

Actually, university presses don't manage scholarship by increasing prices astronomically now. The scholarly presses, minus sales of popular regional items or increasing subsidies from the government or their parent institution, could not survive in today's market.

Is electronic publishing a way out for them as it may be for OCLC? Not, some say, without a change in university tenure and promotion policies, but I don't take that as the final answer.

What is the future of university presses, libraries, and OCLC in a scholarly world where scholarship tells us more and more about less and less? Or where, as Weiskel notes, every scholar becomes her or his own publisher, via desktop publishing? In the long run, this will indeed "atomize communities of scholarly discourse."

All of us have hoped for a long time that scientific and technical journals would go on line and we would pay for items as we used them. That prospect has been long delayed. But when Johns Hopkins Welch Medical Library became involved in a project to provide one of the basic medical handbooks online to office physicians and can now revise that work regularly on the basis of new research, one has to raise the question of the role of libraries and organizations like OCLC in such information provision. The reception of LEXIS and WESTLAW law offices is yet another example of ready access to legal information without recourse to numerous inserts, pocket parts, and the legal profession's arcane system of information classification. Still, legal research leans not only on statutes and judicial opinions but also on scholarship in non-legal works.

Does "End User OCLC" become "Endless OCLC," and encompass the entire world of knowledge? With all these millions of records in our database we are coming close to Conrad Gesner's sixteenth century dream of universal bibliographic control. What is OCLC's role vis a vis access to information itself? Can we provide mechanisms that identify portions of texts and make those portions

available to users as Kilgour suggested in "Beyond Bibliography"? Or is ours another role? What about our sensitivity to the changing patterns of scholarship which often depend more upon quantitative rather than qualitative data ?

One possibility might be the loading of texts along with our bibliographic data, as is envisioned in the experiment with the Twayne Author Series. Another possibility might be serving as an interconnecting activity among abstracting, indexing, and textual database operations, thus improving the user's access to specific information. As we move beyond bibliographic activity, OCLC must find its specific role among the various information providers. What is our niche and how do we develop it? I predict that answering that question will be our most difficult task.

INTERNATIONAL OCLC: TODAY OHIO, TOMORROW THE WORLD

In the last two decades OCLC has expanded from an Ohio libraries organization, with some out-of-state network members, to a broad-based national computerized library center, to an international library data base with numerous contracts in Europe, a few in the Far East, and more yet to come. As one of my somewhat awed students said recently, "OCLC is spreading everywhere!" Few doubt the advisability of an international approach or the need for an international database. In a global economy and with the international scope of scholarship, we could not continue to be solely a national database.

Realistically, though, much of scholarship abroad, as is true of scholarship at home, is the province of relatively few persons. That is a problem for libraries and also a problem for OCLC. While we take courage from the fact that we now have international links with the United Kingdom, France, etc., and while we are proud of the enhancement of the database resulting therefrom, we cannot be unconcerned about the economic consequences. The question of cost benefit and who pays is no less a concern here in the international arena than in other areas.

Added to the problem of economics is the problem of how national libraries fit into the picture. OCLC has established a joint venture with the British Library, but its contract with France is through the Ministry of Education for the national universities. Other nations have a more highly structured national system than we do.

What happens when we enter into ventures whose pattern does not reflect a largely decentralized federal/state system and a whole congerie of independent college, university, public, and school libraries? Clearly the Board will be wrestling with this problem in the very near future. Your advice and counsel would be helpful.

CONCLUSION

As I have reflected on the above questions, I fear I have provided you with more questions than answers. Nor have I given you much of a sense of OCLC's direction, as my speech title and the OCLC press release suggested I might.

However, what I hope I have done is to lay out some issues with which this important constituency, RLAC, and OCLC will have to wrestle, not only in the sessions tomorrow, but also in the years immediately ahead of us. The issues are tough and the decisions we make together will not be easy. But as academics we often talk too much and decide too little. The Research Libraries Advisory Committee is one of our most important advisory groups. You are in a position to provide us with the best thinking in the library profession today. As a Board member, I urge you in the next twenty-four hours to argue vigorously about the direction OCLC should take, and then to give us your best advice on where we should go from here. Let us talk, but let us also decide. You will serve OCLC and librarianship well if you resolve now that you will not leave Dublin tomorrow without some recommendations.

Keynote speech for the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Directors of Research Libraries in OCLC, Dublin, Ohio.

March 19, 1989